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John Wesley, Irenaeus, and Christian Mission: Rethinking Western Christian Theology

Abstract

John Wesley (1703-1791) was a theologian and practitioner of mission. The theological sophistication of his missiology has never been fully appreciated for three reasons: 1) Wesley seldom used the language of “mission,” 2) he intentionally masked the depth of his learning in the interest of “plain, sound English,” and 3) interpreters assumed that as an evangelist, Wesley could not be taken seriously as theologian. Quite to the contrary, this article shows the depth and sophistication of Wesley’s doctrinal and missiological thinking. Reviewing Western Christian theology from the first century to our day, this article examines the close use of Irenaeus by Wesley, which carries high potency for Christian fidelity, discipleship, theological integrity, authentic mission, and Spirit-powered transformation in persons and culture.

Keywords: John Wesley, Irenaeus, mission, theology, recapitulation

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Introduction

John Wesley (1703-1791) was a theologian and practitioner of mission. The theological sophistication of his missiology has never been fully appreciated for three reasons: 1) Wesley seldom used the language of “mission,” 2) he intentionally masked the depth of his learning in the interest of “plain, sound English,”¹ and 3) interpreters assumed that as an evangelist, Wesley could not be taken seriously as theologian. Quite to the contrary, this article shows the depth and sophistication of Wesley’s doctrinal and missiological thinking. Reviewing Western Christian theology from the first century to our day, I set forth a thesis which I believe carries high potency for Christian fidelity, discipleship, theological integrity, authentic mission, and Spirit-powered transformation in persons and culture.

Albert Outler—scholar of the whole Christian tradition, not just Wesley—wrote, “Wesley was working against an immense background with a remarkable repertory.” But he more often concealed than displayed this. Wesley’s reticence to parade his learning has “encouraged both his disciples and his critics to ignore the intricate mosaic that lies behind his plain-style prose. The result has been a general underestimation of Wesley’s actual stature as a theologian and, therefore, of his place in the transition from Protestant orthodoxy to ‘modernity’, and his relevance for later ages.”²

Outler documents Wesley’s “lifelong interest in church history” and “profound sense of constancy” through the turbulence of time. Wesley intentionally “re-enter[ed] the Christian past in order to appropriate its best treasures for his own time, because, amidst all historical change, he saw an essential continuity that had perdured.” Further, Wesley believed the Christian tradition “developed in a more stable fashion within the Greek Orthodoxy than in the Latin West.”³ This viewpoint colored Wesley’s later theological work.

An underlying thesis here is that deep personal experience of God and formative theological paradigms always exist together and shape each other. Wesley understood this. He did not seek an experience of God void of a theological framework, nor did he desire an abstract theological framework that was separate or separable from experiencing God. He sought a theological framework that in fact expressed and nurtured that experience. A key implication of this framework is that the spiritual-theological authenticity of any awakening or renewal movement is shaped by its theological assumptions (paradigms, root metaphors) as much as by the moving of the Spirit in people’s experience. God’s Spirit seeks to shape both behavior and thought, quite as we should expect. My central task in this paper is to

trace a line, a narrative, from the New Testament Gospel of the kingdom to John Wesley and on into our day, noting some critical points of doctrine and discipleship along the way.

1. Jesus and the Good News of the Kingdom

The person and the message that saves the world and brings new creation is Jesus Messiah and the kingdom he brings (what E. Stanley Jones called the Person and the Plan⁴). This is the message and The Way that Jesus' first apostles and the early church embodied (not just affirmed). It is what the first Christians proclaimed and extended and "gossiped," as Michael Green put it.⁵ The early church (and especially the apostles John and Paul) understood this deeply. By the Spirit they were able to articulate as well as embody this Good News in ways that communicated effectively through and beyond the Hebrew-Greek divide (*Logos* theology; the kingdom and "plan" or "economy" [*oikonomia*] of God).

John Wesley felt that the long-living Apostle John was closest to the heart of Jesus, and therefore the gospel. Thus the most pure, perfect embodiment of the gospel is found in John's writings- Gospel, Revelation, and in the purest distilled form, 1 John.⁶ The "sum of the whole gospel," Wesley said, is found here: "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19).⁷ Yet Wesley also drew largely on Paul and all of scripture, both Testaments.

The vitality of the early church (during the first three centuries) was grounded in the New Testament gospel of Jesus and the kingdom, embodied in multiplying communities of faithful Jesus disciples- the body of Christ, fired by the Spirit. This is The Way and it is *ever* the basis of genuine renewal and awakening in the church through history.

2. John and Paul: Reconciling all things in Jesus Christ; destroying Satan's work

The apostles John and Paul, especially, bridged into Greco-Roman culture with abiding effectiveness: John with his *logos* theology of embodied love- Word made flesh- and Paul with his *oikonomia*-all-things (*ta panta*) theology, summarized so succinctly in Colossians 1 and especially Ephesians 1:10. God has a plan (*oikonomia*) for the fullness of time to bring everything (*pas* [all], or *ta panta* [all things]) together in proper reconciled relationship under the headship of Jesus Christ.⁸ Paul here builds on the key concepts of *oikos* (household or family) and *kephale* (head our source). To this Pauline strain we add John's emphasis on embodied, obedient love and Jesus' decisive victory over Satan. A key text (which Wesley used in his important Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming") is 1 John 3:8, "The Son of

God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (certainly not to destroy the earth).

With the closing and affirming of the scripture canon, this foundation, especially of John and Paul- supplemented of course by all the other New Testament writings and the lived example of Christian communities- became the critical basis for all future Christian theology. Though Paul and John used differing terminology, they both proclaim and embody precisely the same message, the same Gospel Way- embodied discipleship. Thus they provide mutually reinforcing parallel articulations of the gospel, giving the Good News of the Kingdom added *intellectual, philosophical, and incarnational impact* in the expanding circles of culture beyond the worlds of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome- to the ends of the earth.

3. Irenaeus – Recapitulation: Reconciling all under the *headship* of Jesus Christ through the love and grace of God

Irenaeus lived from c. 134 to 202 AD, completing his ministry as Bishop of Lyons in Gaul (modern-day France). He was likely born in Smyrna.

Johannes Quasten in his *Patrology* calls Irenaeus “by far the most important theologian of the second century.”⁹ In his letter to the presbyter Florinus, Irenaeus writes,

For, when I was still a boy, I knew you [Florinus] in lower Asia, in Polycarp’s house [in Smyrna]... I remember the events of those days more clearly than those which happened recently... so that I can speak even of the place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and disputed, how he came in and went out, the character of his life... how he reported his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words, and what were the things concerning the Lord which he had heard from them... and how Polycarp had received them from the eye-witnesses of the Word of Life, and reported all things in agreement with the Scriptures. I listened eagerly even then to these things through the mercy of God which was given me, and made notes of them, not on paper, but in my heart, and ever by the grace of God do I truly ruminate on them.¹⁰

Irenaeus thus knew personally and was influenced by Polycarp (69-156 AD), Bishop of Smyrna and martyr. Irenaeus says Polycarp was appointed bishop of Smyrna (one of the seven churches of the Apocalypse, Rev. 2:8-11) by Jesus’ original apostles.

Fluent in both Latin and Greek, Irenaeus was a brilliant and “*irenic*” leader and thinker. It was “quite natural,” Michael Green comments, “that Irenaeus, himself a native of Asia Minor, should write in Greek as he conducted his missionary and apologetic work in France.”¹¹ Lyons was the principal city of Celtic

Gaul; Irenaeus notes in his Preface to *Against Heresies* that he was “resident among the Keltae [Celts]” and “accustomed for the most part to use a barbarous dialect.”¹²

Irenaeus was a central figure in the key group of early Christian theologians whose work constituted, in Eric Osborn’s words, “the emergence of Christian theology” proper. For reasons that will become clear later, I believe Irenaeus continues today to be a key figure in bridging between the New Testament gospel of the kingdom and the effective embodiment- in thought and behavior- of the Good News in our day.

Irenaeus wrote during a particularly critical and creative time in Christian theology and discipleship- the period from about 150 to 200 AD. Christian thinkers now had the complete canonical Bible to work with. They more fully engaged pagan philosophy and the challenge of Gnosticism. They mounted an increasingly sophisticated theological and philosophical offense. “Christian thought displayed fresh vigour... Christian argument developed rapidly in the highly original writing of Justin, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian... New Testament ideas took off with such speed that the opposition became increasingly irrelevant.”¹³

Irenaeus is one of the many patristic authors John Wesley studied. Although Wesley does not speak extensively of Irenaeus, Albert Outler is explicit about his influence: Wesley’s “basic idea of the ‘order of salvation’... is obviously an adaptation from St. Irenaeus’s famous doctrine of [*anakephalaiosis*] (i.e. the recapitulatory work of Christ as the ground of all salvation).”¹⁴ (Obvious to Outler this idea is largely overlooked by most.)

As Outler notes, Irenaeus is known especially for his concept of *recapitulation*. This derives from Ephesians 1:10. Eric Osborn points out however that to properly understand Irenaeus’ theology, recapitulation must be seen in connection with three other key concepts (which, if we were so inclined, we might call the “Irenaeus Quadrilateral”):

1) *Intellect*. By this term Irenaeus means God as universal personal loving mind- in Osborn’s words, the one Person “embracing all things in knowledge and vision, indivisible and simultaneous, entire and identical, the source of all good things,” in contrast to Gnostic ideas.¹⁵ For our understanding today, perhaps the best summary term is Personal All-embracing Self-conscious Love.

2) *Oikonomia*. Throughout scripture we see that God has a divine plan to counteract the effects of sin and restore and advance his whole creation. This *oikos* word, common in Greek culture and used fairly frequently by Paul and in the Septuagint, signifies the overall economy of salvation to which Paul refers in Ephesians 1:10 (“as an *oikonomia* for the fullness of time”).

3) *Recapitulation*. Here is the plan: to reconcile, sum up, unite *all things* in Jesus Christ. God's "work involves joining the end to the beginning and changing reality in a radical way, so that the word becomes flesh, Alpha is joined to Omega, and death becomes life," notes Osborn.¹⁶ This is precisely what Paul writes in Colossians: Jesus Christ "is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:17-20). This is recapitulation.

4) *Participation*. The goal of God's plan is personal *participation* with God, becoming "participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4)- living in communion with God in the body of Christ transformingly in the world. This connects of course with the Eastern Christian idea of *deification* and with Wesley's understanding of sanctification or Christian perfection.

These four concepts are closely interconnected. They can be linked visually as follows:

Intellect (Divine Mind) → Oikonomia → Recapitulation → Participation

Or in language more familiar to us:

Triune God → Divine Plan → Reconciliation in Jesus Christ → Holy Discipleship

The similarities here with John Wesley seem self-evident, provided we understand Wesley on his own terms and not through some other lens.

What then is *recapitulation*? "Recapitulation" is nothing more or less than a summation of Paul's succinct statement in Ephesians 1:9-10 (stated a bit more fully in Colossians 1), best translated as: God "has made known to us the mystery of his will, intentionally set forth in Jesus Christ, as a plan [economy] for the fullness of time, to *bring all things together in proper relationship under Jesus Christ [anakephalaiosis]*- all things, in heaven and on earth."¹⁷

In today's English, *recapitulation* fails to capture Irenaeus' meaning. We think of *recapitulation* as simply a summary, as one might "recap" a story or a sports event. In Irenaeus, *recapitulation* means precisely what Paul means in Ephesians 1:10- bringing all things together in proper relationship under Jesus Christ the head (Greek, *kephale*;¹⁸ Latin, *caput*, the root of such English words as *capital*, *captain*, and

chapter). Recapitulation, both in Ephesians 1:10 and in Irenaeus' usage, thus means bringing all things into proper relationship under the headship of Jesus.

Irenaeus' great work is *Detection and Overthrow of the Pretended but False Knowledge* (of Gnosticism), commonly known in English as *Against Heresies* (running over 600 pages in a recent edition). However Irenaeus also wrote a marvelous little book, *On the Apostolic Teaching*, available as a small paperback.¹⁹

The *recapitulation* framework was not unique to Irenaeus, though it is most associated with him. Osborn elaborates:

Recapitulation... dominates the New Testament and the theology of Ignatius, Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Athanasius. It includes three sets of motifs: Christ corrects and perfects all that is; as Christus Victor he is the climax of the economy of saving history; and as the perfection of being, goodness and truth, he gives life to the dying, righteousness to sinners and truth to those in error.²⁰

My central argument here is this: Irenaeus of Lyons represents a key moment in the emergence of Christian theology. His is the first comprehensive theological articulation of the New Testament gospel between the close of the New Testament period and the divisive theological controversies that followed and that would lead in time to the East–West, Greek–Latin divide in theology and eventually the schism between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. He is a both/and convergence figure, the comprehensiveness of whose theology had particular attraction for Wesley in its holding together the mystery and rationality of the gospel; image and word; regeneration through the blood of Jesus Christ and sanctification- restoration of the image of God after the likeness of Jesus Christ. Salvation by the *Word of God* implants the dynamism of the *image of God* into the Christian life (both personal and corporate). An experience of God in which there is a *conworking* of divine sovereignty and human freedom; an evangelical synergism lived out in faithful discipleship, “all inward and outward holiness” (to use one of Wesley’s favorite phrases). This stance requires holding in tension the truth of divine sovereignty and human capacity, which Latin Christianity mostly failed to do.

In his understanding of sanctification in its various dynamics, Wesley was more drawn to authors other than Irenaeus, as we have noted. But his understanding of sanctification was worked out largely within the frame provided by Irenaeus and some of Irenaeus’ more astute contemporaries.



4. Augustine vs. Pelagius: Dividing the Gospel

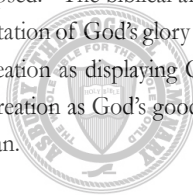
The often-controversial Tertullian (c. 155–c. 240 AD), from the North African Roman province of Carthage, was Irenaeus' younger contemporary. Like Irenaeus, he wrote extensively against heresy. Unlike Irenaeus however, who bridged the East-West cultural and linguistic divide, Tertullian's mindset was Latin. He was the first Christian theologian to produce an extensive body of Christian writings in Latin. For this reason he is often called "the father of Latin Christianity."

Most Christians today it seems are more familiar with Tertullian's name (and his use of the term *trinity*) than Irenaeus' (at least in the West, at least until recently). Tertullian however represents an enduring East-West divide in a way that Irenaeus does not. With Tertullian and then the great Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD), we are fully into the Greek-Roman divergence in terms of doctrine and worldview.

Gustaf Aulén in *Christus Victor* underscores Tertullian's key role in the emergence of Western Christian theology. He writes, "It is possible to fix with precision the time of the first appearance of the Latin theory [of atonement]. Tertullian prepares the building materials; Cyprian begins to construct out of them a doctrine of the Atonement." Tertullian introduced the ideas of *merit* and *penance*, writing that God "wills that the remission of the penalty [of sin] is to be purchased for the payment, which penance makes." Aulén notes, "The idea of Merit is associated with the performance of that which is commanded, the observance of Law."²¹

Aulén focuses on atonement theology. The larger point however is that Tertullian and his successors introduced what became the typical Western mindset that put not only atonement but also the whole *oikonomia* of God on a rational/legal basis rather than on the broader biblical basis of covenant love and grace.

The next century witnessed the Christian Church's recognition by the Roman Empire, then just thirty years later the fall of Rome. For Western Christianity, this changed the Christian narrative dramatically. Augustine largely reshaped the storyline.²² An unbiblical "spirit is perfect, matter is imperfect" view permeates much of Augustine's writings, for his worldview was strongly shaped by neo-Platonic thought. Augustine so emphasized original sin that the original goodness of creation was eclipsed.²³ The biblical affirmation of the image of God in humankind and the manifestation of God's glory in nature were largely forgotten. Though Augustine did see creation as displaying God's glory, he did not seem to value the very materiality of creation as God's good gift, or fully to understand the place of the earth in God's plan.



So East and West drifted apart. The Eastern Christian mindset was more open to mystery and paradox than was the Latin mindset, which tended toward rationality, law, and either/or antitheses. For Wesleyan theology, the key point is that Wesley *bridged this divide* in creative and powerful ways. At both the experiential and conceptual level, Wesley's broad vision nurtured the dynamism of early Methodism. An important aspect of the historical narrative concerns the controversial British theologian Pelagius.

Pelagius (c. 360–418) spent time in Rome and like Irenaeus was fluent in both Greek and Latin. He was a contemporary of Augustine's whom Augustine (and hence many since) came to regard as a heretic. Pelagius taught a devout and holy life. He stressed human capacity and therefore accountability to respond in faith and obedience to divine grace. Augustine accused him of teaching that humans could of their own free will accept grace and do good works. To Augustine, this was heresy, and the Council of Carthage accordingly declared Pelagius a heretic in 418.

Wesley felt the attacks on Pelagius were personal and probably not theologically justified. He wrote in his own edition of Mosheim's *Concise Ecclesiastical History*, "It is scarce possible at this distance of time to know, what Pelagius really held. All his writings are destroyed: and we have no account of them but from Augustin [*sic*], his furious, implacable enemy. I doubt whether he was any more an Heretic than Castellio, or Arminius." Ted Campbell notes,

Elsewhere Wesley stated his guess that Pelagius was "both a wise and holy man," whereas [Augustine was] "full of pride [and] bitterness."... Pelagius, Wesley wrote to John Fletcher, "very probably held no other heresy than you and I do now." [Wesley] therefore doubted... whether Pelagius himself would have subscribed to "Pelagianism," meaning... the view foisted on Pelagius by Augustine and identified as "Pelagian" in the subsequent Christian tradition, according to which human beings have a natural ability to keep God's commandments. Wesley may have felt that Pelagius was a kindred spirit.²⁴

Wesley wrote very similarly about "the real character of Montanus,"²⁵ and I have no doubt whatsoever that Wesley saw both Pelagius and Montanus as advocates of heart religion and responsible grace, and therefore as kindred spirits.

It now seems clear that Pelagius' mindset was more Celtic than Latin. His conflict with Augustine *et al.* was a conflict fed partly by cultural and partly by theological and even political differences. Celtic Christianity was never dominated by Rome until about the eighth century, and even then only partially so. Rather than developing a detailed argument here, I will piggyback on the work of Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*. Newell writes,

The prayers of the Western Isles [of Great Britain] and elsewhere in the Celtic world certainly reflect the same emphasis on creation as those attributed to St Columba and St Patrick... They continually portray the elements of the earth as expressions of God's grace and goodness and see God in the ordinary and everyday instead of exclusively in the Church.

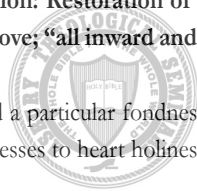
I had discovered characteristics of the old Celtic Church in the prayers of the Western Isles, but where was the original source of this spiritual tradition? When I explored the earliest manifestations of Celtic Christianity, in the fourth-century writings of Pelagius, for example, I found a similar emphasis on the life of God within creation. This much-maligned early British Christian stressed not only the essential goodness of creation – and our capacity to glimpse what he called “the shafts of divine light” that penetrate the thin veil dividing heaven and earth – but, very specifically, the essential goodness of humanity. Pelagius maintained that the image of God can be seen in every newborn child and that, although obscured by sin, it exists at the heart of every person, waiting to be released through the grace of God.²⁶

For our purposes here, precisely what Pelagius believed and whether his views pushed beyond acceptable orthodoxy, and the extent of Pelagian influence on or affinity with Celtic Christianity, is beside the point. The point is that Christianity in the British Isles maintained an emphasis on “the wisdom of God in creation” and specifically on the importance and capacity of *the image of God in persons* that is more attuned to scripture and to early Eastern Christianity than it is to Latin Christianity, with its emphasis on sin, depravity, law, and institutionalized church structures and authority. Western Christianity lost the essential biblical balance that Wesley perceived, experienced, taught, and sought mightily to extend- and with considerable success.

Celtic and Eastern Christianity in fact incarnate similar understandings of the faith. Both streams were deeply immersed in scripture. They showed a positive assessment of creation generally and of human nature (image of God). It should be no surprise therefore to find Wesley more attuned to these streams than to the more legal, rationalistic mindset of Latin Christianity- though of course Wesley was ready always to learn from anyone who demonstrated pure love for God and neighbor.

5. John Wesley – Full salvation: Restoration of the image of God; the mind of Christ; faith working by love; “all inward and outward holiness”; all things made new

Though Wesley had a particular fondness for Ephrem Syrus, “Macarius the Egyptian,” and other witnesses to heart holiness, still the affinity with Irenaeus



is notable. Outler highlighted Irenaeus' influence, as we noted. In fact Outler's thesis should be read in full and carefully studied:

[Wesley's] basic idea of the "order of salvation"- as the process of the restoration of the image of God- is obviously an adaptation from St. Irenaeus's famous doctrine of [*anakephalaiosis*, recapitulation] (i.e. the recapitulatory work of Christ as the ground of all salvation). His central theme (divine-human participation) was learned in large part from Macarius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ephrem Syrus. His concept of Christian [*koinonia*] was more Greek than Latin, and this explains his freedom to correct what he regarded as the excessive sacerdotalism within the Anglican ecclesiology that he had inherited. At the center of all these ideas was his understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit as God's personal presence in the believer's heart and will, and in the Spirit-filled community and its sacraments. This enabled him to think of the Christian believer as indwelt and led by the Spirit within rather than being possessed by the Spirit as if by some irresistible force.²⁷

My main emphasis here is the way Wesley embedded his understanding of holiness and Christian discipleship in a *larger theological framework*, and the high significance of that framework (signaled by the term *recapitulation*) for our understanding and practice of transformative holiness discipleship today. Two points: 1) Irenaeus is the bridge figure between the New Testament gospel and Wesley, and 2) as appropriated by Wesley, Irenaeus provides a timely avenue for the reappropriation and rearticulation of Wesleyan theology and discipleship in the new world-age we have entered since about 1945. (See Addendum, Key Parallels between Irenaeus and John Wesley.)

Wesleyan theology since Wesley has suffered domination by a Western Enlightenment mindset. It has been over-influenced by Western rationalist paradigms. The result is that Wesley himself has often been misread and narrowed down to just a part of his message, and thus just a part of the authentic Wesleyan dynamic. In our day, releasing the power of Wesleyan thought, perspective, and worldview means mining anew the deepest roots of Wesley and his spiritual, theological, and historical formation.

This is not an issue of an Eastern Orthodox Wesley versus a Western Catholic, Puritan, or Anglican Wesley. To pit the Eastern (mainly early Greek) and Western (mainly early Latin) influences on Wesley against each other is wasted energy. Wesley held together what never should have been separated in the first place. In *The Radical Wesley* I refer to this achievement as "the Wesleyan synthesis." Others have spoken of Wesley's both/and or "conjunctive" theology.

We must note however that Wesley's life and thought were dynamic. Over decades he kept building out from the center, expanding his theological understanding, putting it into an ever-larger frame as Methodism grew and as Wesley himself matured theologically and as he engaged the rapidly expanding historical, philosophical, scientific, and economic knowledge of his day.²⁸

I argue here for the contemporary theological/worldview relevance of Wesley's late sermons- particularly Sermons 54-64, beginning with "On Eternity" and concluding with "The New Creation."²⁹ These are not in fact sermons but short essays. Wesley says he arranged them (in his 1788 four-volume edition) "in proper order; placing those first which are intended to throw light on some important Christian doctrines; and afterwards those which more directly relate to some branch of Christian practice; and I shall endeavour to place them in such an order that one may illustrate and confirm the other."³⁰

These sermons follow not the logic of systematic theology, but rather the logic of the history of redemption (*via salutis*). The arrangement is historical and to some degree chronological. This is the larger theological framework in which we should understand Wesleyan theology and experience today. Here Wesley summarizes, I believe, the heart of his theology and gives us his essential, mature theological judgment. These sermons are foundational, not eccentric, as sometimes viewed.

To these sermons we should add Wesley's growing concern over many decades with "the wisdom of God in creation"- especially in light both of Irenaeus and of twenty-first century culture. The way forward is to keep the vital beating heart of Wesleyan theology and experience and place it with increasing clarity and creative vigor in the larger biblical framework of God's *oikonomia*- his plan for the fullness of time to reconcile all things in Jesus Christ, things on earth and in heaven; things visible and invisible; things present and things to come; until the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord and his will is done on earth as in heaven. Wesley in his late decades was pointing in this direction. We should follow this path. This means there is a *very fruitful* theological/historical/formatonal agenda before us now, in God's providence and the fullness of time.

Wesley's key themes, as we know, were full salvation: restoration of the image of God; the mind of Christ; faith working by love; "all inward and outward holiness"; "holiness and happiness"; "justice, mercy, and truth." Increasingly Wesley put these themes within the framework of "the wisdom of God in creation" and God's plan to reconcile all things in Jesus Christ. We see this most fully in Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance" (Rom 8, creation itself liberated), Sermon 62, "The End [or Goal] of Christ's Coming" (1 John 3:8, to "destroy the works of the devil"),

and Sermon 64, “The New Creation” (Rev 21:5, “Behold, I make all things new”). But the whole series of sermons in all its interconnections is important.

Always with Wesley, this theology was in the service of embodied discipleship. In early Methodism, seekers were immediately started on the road to discipleship (especially through classes and bands), which is the road to Christ-like character.³¹

6. Theology and Awakening since Wesley

The trajectory from Wesley and early Methodism to our day has been well chronicled in books such as Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (1971) and its revision, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (1977); Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (1957); Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (1976) and its revision with a fine new introduction by Douglas Strong, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice* (2014); David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (2005); Henry Knight III, ed., *From Aldersgate to Azusa Street: Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal Vision of the New Creation* (2010); and similar studies. My point here is to note *the ever-present interconnection between awakenings and the theological worldview in which they are embedded*. That is, the renewal or awakening itself, and the theological assumptions within which it is birthed and then guided.

Church Renewal Trajectory

The Great Awakening and the Evangelical Revival in Great Britain, most especially early Methodism, powerfully released the renewing dynamic of the Holy Spirit anew into the world. The energy of that renewal, though it ebbed and flowed, birthed new movements all around the world, ranging from classical Pentecostalism to various contemporary charismatic currents. Over time, the energy burst forth anew or else got siphoned off in various directions. Sometimes the energy was diluted; sometimes it got mixed with extreme or alien currents; sometimes it dissipated totally or petrified into dead institutional forms. Again, various authors have traced this.³²

Today, various renewals and awakenings are stirring around the world. Their experiential and theological authenticity (biblically speaking) varies widely. A very significant stream, in my view, is that which is now evident through the Seedbed and New Room currents that have been catalyzed by Asbury Theological Seminary over the past few years. Quite a different current is summarized by Brett McCracken in “The Rise of Reformed Charismatics” (*Christianity Today* 62:1 [January-February 2018], 53-56). An enthusiastic partisan of the movement writes

this article, and while informative and fairly comprehensive, the article is totally uncritical. It provides however a timely illustration of my main point here.

The thesis of McCracken's article is that God's Spirit has launched a dynamic new global movement that weds traditional (even 5-point Calvinist) Reformed theology with the charismatic gifts. Spirit and Word; doctrine on fire! A typical comment in the article: "Plenty of [leaders in this movement] agree that the Word and Spirit combination addresses the challenges of today's cultural moment." Again, "There is a sense that the theological groundedness of the Reformed tradition, plus the missionary zeal and powerful worship of the charismatic tradition, could be a powerful missional combination" (p. 56).

Of course we celebrate the genuine work of the Holy Spirit in every person and church community. But the analysis in this article, uncritical as it is, is remarkably binary (Reformed theology + *charismata*) rather than comprehensive. The big answer for church and world today is conservative Calvinist theology (verging toward fundamentalism) wedded to charismatic experience. This is two-dimensional. The church is much broader than this. The article says little about discipleship or ethics and nothing at all about social witness, creation care, or other central prophetic biblical themes such as justice for the widow, the orphan, and the alien. If one employs a grid that incorporates the historic church's four great streams (Catholic/Orthodox, Evangelical, Anabaptist, Pentecostal), the shallowness of the Reformed-Charismatic model becomes obvious.³³ The article about Reformed Charismatics illustrates my point: In any awakening, the theological assumptions or grounding of the movement are crucial.

Theological Worldview Trajectory

Our theological problem today is that the church has yet to recover the fully biblical comprehensive worldview that Irenaeus and some of his contemporaries articulated, and that John Wesley began to lay out in his last decade. Several chapters in my book *Salvation Means Creation Healed* detail how the unbiblical divorce between earth and heaven developed (in Western theology especially) from the fourth century onward. This distortion continues even now, as we see in many popular hymns and gospel songs. Randy Maddox in "John Wesley's Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences" notes:

While scripture speaks of God's ultimate salvific goal as "the new heavens and earth" (i.e., transformation of everything in the universe)... Christians through the first millennium [came] to assume increasingly that our final state is "heaven above"... seen as a realm where human spirits dwelling in ethereal bodies

join eternally with all other spiritual beings... in continuous worship of the Ultimate Spiritual Being... [Christians] assumed that the physical universe, which we abandon at death, would eventually be annihilated.³⁴

By 1500 this earth-heaven divorce was nearly complete. By Wesley's day, the Christian faith both East and West fully accepted the divorce of heaven and earth. More than accepted it, in fact; it was now unconsciously assumed, part of the Christian worldview. The chasm between earth and heaven could be bridged only through the sacraments and mystical experience. At death the soul escaped earth and entered the timeless bliss of a spiritual heaven.

This earth-heaven divorce was accepted and assumed by later premillennialist dispensationalism, as it still is today. Seven historical trends, ranging from the ancient philosophical inheritance of Neo-Platonism to today's pop premillennialism, combined to produce the one-sided worldview so popular among most Evangelicals today—even many in Wesleyan churches.³⁵

Combined, these developments shrink the full biblical meaning of salvation and of the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross and resurrection come to mean individual salvation to eternal life in the next world rather than the restoring of a fallen creation now and on into the future, with all the day-by-day discipleship implications that involves.

Mostly unconsciously, Christians deny or distort the full biblical promise of creation healed. Take 1 Peter 1:3-7, for example. Peter speaks of “new birth into a living hope” through Jesus’ resurrection, guaranteeing Christians an imperishable “inheritance” that is “kept in heaven” for them until the time “when Jesus Christ is revealed” at his return to earth. But many understand these verses the way *The Message* paraphrase does. *The Message* misinterprets the passage, rendering “an inheritance... kept in heaven” until Christ’s return as “a future in heaven” for Christians. As a matter of fact, 1 Peter says nothing about “a future in heaven.” Rather it speaks of Jesus having gone to heaven until the time of his return to earth- until Jesus’ return brings “the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets,” as Peter proclaimed (Acts 3:21).

How easily today's Christians assume the unbiblical earth-heaven divorce! Christians have unconsciously bought into a worldview that inverts the direction of salvation, seeing salvation as going up to heaven rather than heaven coming to earth, as the Bible teaches. We have been taught pseudo-evangelical pessimism rather than Wesleyan (and biblical) optimism of grace. We have been taught that Jesus ascended to heaven so that our spirits could join him there eternally, rather than what the Bible says: Jesus will come to earth to redeem all creation, including

our own physical bodies. Many contemporary Christians are modern-day Gnostics and thus functional apostates.³⁶

Biblical salvation means all creation healed. Grasping the power and wonder of full salvation means affirming the biblical doctrine of creation and the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection for the healing and restoration of God's own created order- and the real-world implications of that for responsible holiness discipleship here and now. In the biblical view, as Timothy Tennent notes, "creation is innately good apart from us. Before humans were created, God created plant and animal life and called them good (Gen. 1:11, 21, 24). Creation has intrinsic value, not just instrumental value." And beyond this, the "very presence of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ" testifies "to the inherent goodness of creation."³⁷ So let us embody this in our ethics and discipleship, our life patterns, our politics and economics!

Can we not see that this reality must shape our discipleship, our theological worldview, and thus the frame within which we understand and expect a great awakening? And must guide our methodology, worship, and teaching?

Maddox shows convincingly that the distorted theological worldview described above is precisely what the mature John Wesley was pushing against:

In the last decade of his life . . . Wesley reclaimed the biblical imagery of God's cosmic renewal, shifting his focus from "heaven above" to the future new creation. After a tentative defense of animals having "souls" in 1775, he issued a bold affirmation of final salvation for animals in the 1781 sermon "The General Deliverance." . . . Broadening the scope even further, Wesley's 1785 sermon on "The New Creation" refused to limit God's redemptive purposes to sentient beings, insisting that the very elements of our current universe will be present in the new creation, though they will be dramatically improved over current conditions.³⁸

Maddox's conclusions confirm my own study of Wesley. The larger point is the relevance of this for a theological worldview framework for faithful holiness discipleship and for spiritual awakening now and on into the future.

Conclusion: Challenge and Opportunities

God through his Holy Spirit seems to be at work today in significant new ways, bringing renewals and awakenings in various traditions. If Wesleyans are to catch the wave, and especially if they are to contribute to the kind of genuine, biblically authentic awakening that is a true sign of the kingdom of God and not settle for lesser partial or errant paths, we must follow this path. We must experience

and articulate a renewal that is at once biblically sound, experientially genuine, and interlaced with a theological kingdom-of-God, “all things” worldview—an embodied message that is as dynamic as that of Paul, John, Irenaeus, and John Wesley. As comprehensive as E. Stanley Jones pictured, especially in *Is the Kingdom of God Realism?* This is the gospel of Jesus and the kingdom.

Lacking such a comprehensive vision, we (the Christian church, whether Wesleyan, Reformed, Pentecostal, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or whatever) are liable to fall back into the same errors and inadequacies that have plagued the church throughout history:

1. *Individualism* – “Salvation is only about me and my relationship with God.” Any social consequences are either unimportant or automatic.
2. *Rationalism* – Salvation means believing right doctrines. It is not essentially about walking in the ways of God in faithful covenant community or the full restoration of the image of God.
3. *Free-floating mysticism* – Salvation is personal spirituality resonating with a vague cosmic spirituality, not necessarily based in history or authoritative divine revelation. No necessary ethical implications.
4. *Unbiblical dualism* – Salvation concerns spiritual things, but not physical or material things. God will take care of the earth and history; of politics, culture, and economics. Not our responsibility (except to enjoy the bounty of a dominated, despoiled earth).
5. *Institutionalism and authoritarianism* – Salvation is incorporation into the right religious community or structure or submission to the right authority. Discipleship is delegated to the church’s leadership.

All these tendencies compromise the power of renewal for true personal and cultural transformation. They undercut the power of the Gospel to point prophetically the way to the kingdom of God in biblical, Spirit-empowered fullness.

This is the danger facing spiritual awakenings today. Clearly we Wesleyans need an experiential articulation of the Good News of the kingdom of God that is as broad, dynamic, rooted, and culture-shaking as was the church of the first few centuries, as pictured so graphically by Alan Kreider in *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker, 2016).

What such a biblically earthed discipleship might look like is suggested in *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, especially in the Conclusion—"Living New Creation Now." The culture-shaping or social-reform impact of an awakening is not automatic. It is not "predestined" or predetermined by God. A movement's biblical authenticity depends on the authenticity of the theology in which it is embedded.

My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will guide us to an experience of the renewed image of God in us corporately, as Christian community, that incarnates the full biblical promise of "all things" salvation. Or conversely: That the Holy Spirit will help us articulate such a theological vision and live it out so authentically that signs of the kingdom of God beyond human manufacture will be so obvious as to catalyze, by the Spirit of Jesus, the most authentic, convincing embodiment of the Good News of Jesus Christ that our world has yet seen, even and maybe especially in this day of globalization, technological wizardry, and emerging cyber culture.

Addendum: Key Parallels between Irenaeus and John Wesley (Partial List)

We can identify a good many instructive parallels between John Wesley and Irenaeus, despite obvious differences. The distance of time and culture in fact make the parallels all the more striking. (Related parallels between Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian have previously been noted by others and myself.³⁹)

1. *Affinity for the Apostle John and his writings.* Irenaeus knew Polycarp personally, who knew the Apostle John personally. Irenaeus says the Book of Revelation was written in the generation just before he himself was born. Rob Wall has documented Wesley's hermeneutical preference for John, and especially 1 John (God is love!).
2. *Deep scriptural engagement.* Both Irenaeus and Wesley knew the Bible intimately and of course engaged the New Testament in the original Greek. Both were *intentional* and insistent in prioritizing scripture over all other sources of knowledge. They engaged the Old Testament theologically. Both made us of the *analogy of faith* or *rule of faith*; all scripture is to be interpreted in accordance with the primary narrative of God's plan of salvation healing through Jesus Christ.⁴⁰
3. Strong, insistent emphasis on the *image of God*. Salvation and discipleship concern the work of the Spirit in transforming

Christians into the restored image of Jesus Christ- the life of holiness that follows justification.

4. *An emphasis on love within the complex of other doctrinal and practical emphases.*

This of course ties in both with the Johannine emphasis and the image-of-God theme.

5. *Theological method:* Doing theology by combining *reason* and *image*. Both men make strict, careful use of logic when appropriate, but also engage the faculties of imagery, imagination, analogy, and metaphor in a way that suggests self-conscious intentionality.⁴¹

6. *Both Wesley and Irenaeus were conversant with the philosophical currents of the day*, as well as the history of theology. Both made use of philosophy but in a limited, discriminating way. Philosophy (especially speculative philosophy) could be useful in theology and apologetics, but was strictly secondary to scripture, where God speaks authoritatively and definitively.

7. *Emphasis on the wisdom of God in creation.* Today this theme in Wesley is getting renewed attention.⁴² In this regard Wesley witnesses to a characteristic of the better sort of patristic theology, found explicitly in Irenaeus.⁴³ *Creation* in scripture and theology refers not exclusively or even primarily to God's initial acts of creation, but to God's whole salvation plan (*oikonomia*) to restore and continue the flourishing of "the land" and the whole created order. Creation is the predicate and raw material for New Creation.

End Notes

¹ John Wesley, Preface, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 2 vols. (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1825), 2:iv. (This 2-volume set is a reprint of Wesley's 4-volume 1788 edition.)

² Albert C. Outler, "Introduction," *Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial Ed.) (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-), 1:67.

³ Outler, "Introduction," *WJW* 1:74.

⁴ E. Stanley Jones, *Is the Kingdom of God Realism?* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1940), 54.

⁵ The early Christians "went everywhere gossiping the gospel." Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 173.

⁶ Robert W. Wall, “Wesley as biblical interpreter” in Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113-28.

⁷ Wesley, Preface, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1825 ed.), 2:iv.

⁸ I have noted elsewhere that Paul’s use of *oikonomia* theology is an alternative way of speaking of the kingdom of God and thus is a brilliant example of inculturating the gospel in a different context.

⁹ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* [1949] (Allen, Tex.: Christian Classics reprint, n.d.), 1:287.

¹⁰ Quoted in Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:287.

¹¹ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 17.

¹² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (reprint, Ex Fontibus, 2016), 26. On Irenaeus’ significance within the history of Christian mission, see Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol 1 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 74f, 79, 121f. Latourette comments that from Irenaeus’ reference “we may gather that he preached in Celtic and that the Church contained Christians of the native stock” though “the Celtic element, if present, must either have been small or partially assimilated to Graeco-Roman culture.” Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 98.

¹³ Eric Osborn, *The Emergence of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1.

¹⁴ Outler, “Introduction,” *WJW* 1:75.

¹⁵ Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21.

¹⁶ Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 21.

¹⁷ My translation. Here Paul turns the noun for “head” (*kephale*) into a verb, a usage related to Paul’s statement in Ephesians 1:22 that “God placed all things under [Jesus] feet and appointed him to be head [*kephale*] over everything [or, all things, *ta panta*] for the church” (NIV).

¹⁸ The common word *kephale* with its various meanings occurs 37 times in the NT, but the verb Paul uses here, *anakefalaiouo*, is found only here and in Romans 13:9 (with the meaning “to sum up” an argument).

¹⁹ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NJ: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 118 pp.

²⁰ Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 2003), 17.

²¹ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 81. Tertullian quotation from *De Poenitentia*, 6, quoted in Aulén, 81.

²² See the discussion in Howard A. Snyder with Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2011), 13-15, where Augustine's monumental *City of God* is briefly discussed.

²³ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 143-45; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 292-301; 313-18.

²⁴ Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood, 1991), 64. Campbell specifies the sources. J. Philip Newell notes, "In fact, it now appears that much of Pelagius' work is available, although much of it has yet to be translated from the original Latin." J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 9.

²⁵ John Wesley, "The Real Character of Montanus," *The Works of John Wesley* (3rd Jackson ed.), 11:485-86.

²⁶ Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, 5-6.

²⁷ Outler, "Introduction," *WJW* 1:75. (The words in brackets are my transliterations of Outler's Greek text.)

²⁸ Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), which covers the period toward the end of Wesley's life and on into the early decades of the 19th century, is very enlightening in terms of the dynamic thought-world of Wesley's last decades.

²⁹ Together with the sermon "The Duty of Reproving our Neighbour," these 11 sermons comprised the first volume of a 4-volume edition of sermons which Wesley published in 1788.

³⁰ John Wesley, Preface, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1825), 2:iii (reprint of Wesley's 4-volume 1788 edition; Wesley's Preface is dated Jan. 1, 1788).

³¹ Consider David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015).

³² See James D. Bratt, "The Reorientation of American Protestantism, 1835-1845," *Church History* 67:1 (March 1998), 52-82.

³³ This grid is detailed in Howard A. Snyder, "Models of Church and Mission," Chap. 11 in *Yes In Christ: Wesleyan Reflections on Gospel, Mission, and Culture* (Toronto: Clements Academic, 2011), 221-58 (especially p. 256). Three other chapters in this book are directly relevant to this discussion: "The Babylonian Captivity of Wesleyan Theology," "The Energies of Church Renewal," and "The Pentecostal Renewal of the Church."

³⁴ Randy Maddox, “John Wesley’s Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44 (2009), 33.

³⁵ Elaborated further in Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, Part One.

³⁶ See Howard A. Snyder, “Where’s the Gospel’s Missing Third?” <https://www.seedbed.com/wheres-the-gospels-missing-third/>.

³⁷ Timothy Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

³⁸ Maddox, “John Wesley’s Precedent,” 34. Maddox notes “Wesley’s reclaiming of the biblical theme of the cosmic scope of redemption...was clearly a concern about animal suffering and theodicy.”

³⁹ Randy Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences, and Differences”; Howard A. Snyder, “John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45:2 (Fall 1990), 29-53 and 55-60.

⁴⁰ “Wesley’s point of departure,” as Irenaeus’, “was always Holy Scripture, understood according to the ‘analogy of faith’ (i.e., the general sense), and as ‘the standing revelation’ in the Christian church throughout her long history.” Outler, “Introduction,” 57.

⁴¹ With regard to Irenaeus, Eric Osborn argues this at some length, suggesting that Irenaeus understood that he needed to engage Gnostic heresies at the image-metaphor level as well as the rational level, given the conceptual-philosophical nature of Gnosticism.

⁴² E.g., David Rainey, “Beauty in Creation: John Wesley’s Natural Philosophy,” *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 9:1 (2017), 18-35.

⁴³ See Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 30-32, 38f; John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially 180-85, “The completion of creation.”

